Jürgen E. Grandt. *Shaping Words to Fit the Soul: The Southern Ritual Grounds of Afro-Modernism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2009. 232 pp. $41.95.

Review by Jennifer M. Wilks, University of Texas at Austin

Inspired by a line from Jean Toomer's *Cane*, the title of Jürgen E. Grandt's study of African American modernism also evokes the literary-historical enterprise, the act of "shaping [works] to fit" a particular school or movement. Accordingly, in deft, lucid prose, Grandt offers readers a compelling argument for freeing modernism from the historical confines of the early twentieth century as well as from the geographic boundaries of the U. S. eastern seaboard. He identifies Afro-modernism "as modernism with a historical conscience" and traces its roots to what many have considered a foundational site for black expressive culture: the American South (9). At once illustrative and expansive, this definition enables Grandt to explore works across a generic, racial, and temporal spectrum that reaches from the nineteenth-century autobiographies of Frederick Douglass to the twenty-first-century novels of Tayari Jones, from the Southern rock of the Allman Brothers Band to the socially conscious hip-hop of Goodie Mob and Little Brother. The result is a book that, like *Cane*, foregrounds and engages the fragmented arcs of Afro-modernism.

At the heart of *Shaping Words to Fit the Soul* is the question of how Southern artists steeped in African American culture have negotiated the gap between representation and reality, a distance Grandt describes as the "modernist alienation of word from world" (22). Whereas Houston A. Baker, Jr., dates the beginning of such negotiation to the rhetorical maneuvers of Booker T. Washington, Grandt looks to the 1892 publication of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, a life narrative which reflects Douglass's evolution from the former slave with an unshakable faith in the power of literacy to the elder statesman with a healthy skepticism of the printed word. According to Grandt, this change parallels the signal personal and political shift in Douglass's life: the realization that words were the beginning, not the end, of the "contest of civilization against barbarism" (5). Played out over the years, this struggle becomes a defining feature of what Grandt, borrowing from Robert Stepto, calls "southern ritual grounds" (5). The challenge for Douglass and his successors, then, is not simply to represent their respective experiences (or those of their fictional personae) but also to contend with disjunctions between these representations ("the word") and the societies ("the world") that seek to control, distort, or negate marginalized individuals and communities.

In addition to demonstrating how these gaps change over time and genre, Grandt also makes evocative comparisons across his selected texts. In his reading, Douglass's navigation of the distance between the political promise of the Emancipation Proclamation and the social reality of Reconstruction's failure foreshadows the struggle between modernity and feudalism in the rural, early-twentieth-century South of Richard Wright's story, "Long Black Song." Rather than gaining prosperity through labor on their hard-won land, Sarah and Silas, Wright's protagonists, are instead thrust back into an antebellum nightmare when Silas' murder of a white salesman results in his lynching and Sarah's flight from home. Similarly, the ancestral longing and regional difference that characterize the contested communication in Toomer's *Cane* find a late twentieth-century analogue in the music of the Allman Brothers Band. Though the group's multiracial members were infused with the work of African American bluesmen, Grandt argues, the historically charged metaphor of the Gregg Allman-penned song "Whipping Post" reveals "a telling inarticulacy that 'unmasks' the [song's] minstrelsy" (103). While "music *can* transcend race," Grandt concludes, it "can never really transcend *history*" (103; original emphasis).

Grandt presents this impasse as indicative of the limitations of Southern music. In keeping with the centrality of fragmentation to modernist expression, however,

recasting difference as constitutive of rather than disruptive to communication, suggests an alternate reading of such charged encounters. Grandt's repeated deployment of the phrase "telling inarticulacy" recalls Édouard Glissant's *opacité* (opaqueness) and Brent Hayes Edwards's *décalage*, both of which posit difference as that which is to be negotiated rather than resolved. In that light, the role of Toomer's protagonists is, perhaps, not to be the South's "true" bards but to appreciate how figures like Fern and Father John are themselves, in their own ways, the keepers of their region's culture. Likewise, perhaps the significance of the Allman Brothers Band's music rests not in its capacity to grasp African American experiences of racialized violence, but rather in its ability to evoke such realities, and in so doing, prompt conversation about them.

The attention Grandt pays to the racial and regional limits of Afro-modernism might have been more constructively applied to the gender dynamics underlying the "breakdown of communication" in Afro-modernist texts. As Nellie Y. McKay has argued, many of *Cane*'s male protagonists fail to capture the women they desire because of "an inability to see [them] as a person rather than only as a woman." If Wright's "Long Black Song" reflects debates "about ownership" (of "time and history," "progress and modernity") in the postbellum South, the story also recalls struggles over who "owns" the black woman's body, especially when that body is uncritically equated with the land. Why must Sarah "embod[y] the ritual ground she inhabits" (62)? Why can Silas not be identified with the farm that he has painstakingly acquired and worked? Such questions would have provided a means of addressing the masculinist tenor of many early to mid-twentieth-century works of African diasporic modernism, and Grandt's analysis would have benefited from their consideration.

This oversight is redeemed, however, in the study's penultimate chapter, a discussion of contemporary novelist Tayari Jones. Through readings of her fictions *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) and *The Untelling* (2005), Grandt credits Jones with destabilizing "not only the sense of community and indeed humanity of [the South's] inhabitants, but also (vernacular) language and storytelling itself" (107). Such destabilization is important because it refuses to privilege any position, be it gendered, racialized, or regionalized, leaving instead all perspectives open to interrogation. From her depiction of the social drama surrounding the Atlanta Child Murders to her exploration of the personal tragedy of a young woman facing early menopause, Jones marshals both the inadequacy and the power of language, and by extension, the potential of modernist forms to illuminate as well as complicate the human condition.

Jennifer L. Griffiths. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance.* Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2009. 134 pp. $39.50.

Reviewed by Carol E. Henderson, University of Delaware

Anyone who picks up a copy of Jennifer Griffiths's *Traumatic Possessions* will be struck by the image on the cover—a taped picture of three women looking back at you. These women—who vary in age and temperament—appear to embody different ways of knowing. That is, their body language and clothing suggest that they have a story to tell . . . a story that one might wish to know—a story that could tell us something noteworthy about the lived experiences of black women. But it is the central figure in the photograph that arrests the viewer. Her eyes are piercing. She is the one figure whose eyes tell you that her story won't come easy. Her direct gaze into the camera asks: Should I trust you? Or better yet, Should I trust you with my story?